Tenn. officials deny testimony helpful to Ray was suppressed

Washington (AP)—A woman who says James Earl Ray was not the assassin of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was committed to a state mental hospital without regard to her role as a possible witness in Ray's defense, Tennessee authorities testified yesterday.

The woman, Grace Walden Stephens, has become a key figure to critics who say there was a cover-up of a conspiracy to kill the civil rights leader.

Although originally scheduled to appear as a witness before the House assassinations committee yesterday, Mrs. Stephens did not testify.

After four doctors testified about her mental condition, G. Robert Blakey, the panel's chief counsel, said there would be no purpose in hearing her account of events on the day of the assassination.

Mark Lane, the lawyer a court appointed as Mrs. Stephens's legal guardian, accused the committee of seeking to destroy Mrs. Stephens "for your own purposes."

Until the doctors testified about the details of Mrs. Stephens's treatment, Mr. Lane said, "I did not understand the depth of your cruelty."

On the day of the assassination April 4, 1968, Mrs. Stephens was a resident in the Memphis rooming house from which Dr. King was believed to have been shot.

Mrs. Stephens has said in various forums that a man she saw fleeing the bathroom in the rooming house shortly after the assassination was not Ray.

By her account, the man was older and thinner than Ray.

A few months after the King assassination, Mrs. Stephens was taken by her common law husband to a Memphis hospital, where Mr. Lane claims she was given "mind-crippling drugs." She subsequently spent 10 years in Western State Mental Hospital in Bolivar, Tenn.

Mr. Lane charged that authorities in Tennessee successfully suppressed Mrs. Stephens's description of the man in the Memphis rooming house, allowing Ray to be charged alone with the murder.

To refute Mr. Lane, the committee yesterday called six witnesses, including four doctors, who traced the steps which led to a legal declaration that Mrs. Stephens was mentally incompetent.

All said there was no connection between the assassination and the decision to commit Mrs. Stephens, now 62, and living in Memphis.

David F. Moore, supervising psychiatrist at John Gastin Hospital in Memphis at the time, said Mrs. Stephens was found to be suffering from mental disorders resulting from alcoholism.

Dr. Moore was unable, however, to explain a notation from a physician's order sheet on Mrs. Stephens's case.

The notation said: "Please notify Memphis Police Department, Homicide as of disposition of patient and hold until disposition is made by Police."

Although the order sheet indicated he had directed that Memphis police be advised of the case, the doctor said he had no memory of the notation, which he said was not normal practice at the hospital.

In place of Mrs. Stephens's testimony, Mr. Lane said he had her prepare an affidavit which he would deliver to the committee.

"They [committee members] are biased and prejudiced and will try to destroy her as a human being," Mr. Lane said.

Asked if he were risking a contempt of Congress citation, Mr. Lane replied: "If they say I have contempt for this committee, they are accurately assessing my feeling."

Ray is currently serving a 99-year sentence as Dr. King's convicted assassin but contends he is innocent and that a confession and guilty plea was coerced from him by Percy Foreman, his original defense attorney, partly to make money on a book contract.